

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE      February 13, 2009  
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WASHINGTON, DC - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) yesterday sent the following letter to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton concerning her upcoming trip to China, calling on her to take a strong public position against violations of the rights of thought, conscience and religion.

The letter urges Secretary Clinton to take a variety of actions, including meeting with Chinese human rights lawyers, publically urging the Chinese government to account for Tibetan Buddhists who are missing, calling for an end to the repression of Chinese Muslims, attending a worship service in an "unregistered" church, and pressing the Chinese to work with the U.S. to bring peace to Sudan.

The text of the letter follows:

February 12, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Clinton

Secretary of State

U.S. Department of State

Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

As you embark on your first diplomatic mission to China, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urges you to speak as eloquently about religious freedom and related human rights in China as you did about the human rights of women at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women. Many religious adherents and human rights defenders in China are subject to severe and ongoing repression. In addition to your meetings with Chinese officials, we encourage you to meet individuals who have experienced human rights abuses, including, among others, lawyers and members of unsanctioned religious groups. Given that these individuals are peacefully seeking rights and freedoms guaranteed by Chinese law and international human rights standards, the U.S. should be speaking out forcefully about protecting their freedoms.

As you know, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is a bipartisan, independent federal agency with nine Commissioners drawn from the private sector; three appointed by the President, three by the House of Representatives and three by the Senate. The Commission encourages you to raise some of the following issues during your discussions:

#### The Release of Human Rights Defenders

: Urge that lawyer Gao Zhisheng be released immediately, as well as all other human rights defenders currently detained. In addition, seek assurances from the Chinese government that human rights defenders will be allowed to freely defend vulnerable groups in accordance with Chinese law and China's Constitution, and international human rights standards. The Commission also urges you to meet with Chinese lawyers while you are in China, many whom have suffered arrests, beatings, disappearances, and the loss of legal licenses.

#### Expanding Religious Freedom in Tibet

: Given that the status of religious freedom in Tibet may be worse now than at any time in the Commission's ten year existence, the Commission recommends that you urge the Chinese Government to end restrictions on Tibetan religious practice. We recommend that you urge the Chinese to take immediate measures to account for all monks and nuns taken into custody, killed or otherwise harmed during protests in 2008 and in 2009; abolish laws requiring government approval of Tibetan religious leaders; publicly state that public devotion to the Dalai Lama including the display and veneration of his picture is legal; release all detained monks and nuns; and permit a visit by independent and impartial experts to Geoden Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's chosen Panchen Lama.

Lift Restrictions on the Religious Activity of Protestants and Catholics and Stop their Arrests and Detentions

: The Commission recommends that you urge the Chinese government to end the harassment and detention of "unregistered" Christian leaders, including the reported detention of 637 Protestants in 2008 and the continued detention and disappearance of a reported 40 Catholic bishops and priests. We urge you to consider attending a worship service at an "unregistered" Protestant or Catholic congregation in Beijing.

Stop the Repression of Peaceful Uyghur Muslim Religious Activities and End the Detentions of Religious Leaders

: The Commission urges that you raise with the Chinese government the need to end the systematic repression of Uyghur Muslim religious activity, including longstanding campaigns to curb "illegal" scripture reading, political indoctrination of clergy, restricting observation of Ramadan and participation in the Hajj pilgrimage, denying minors the right to practice religion, and the arrest and detention of religious leaders.

Protect North Korean Asylum Seekers

: It is important to highlight China's international obligations requiring the protection of asylum seekers, including allowing the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees to operate freely outside Beijing. Accordingly, the Commission urges China to stop the forced repatriation of North Korean asylum seekers and end the issuance of fines and the forced closings of Chinese-Korean Churches that assist North Korean refugees.

Become a Partner for Peace in Sudan

: As the Sudanese government's major oil partner and arms supplier, urge the Chinese government to use its considerable leverage to end genocide and protect religious freedom in Sudan, including through implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

The U.S. bilateral relationship with China is of course very important. We urge you in your discussions to send the clear message that religious freedom is an essential part of America's strategic foreign policy endeavors.

Your longtime commitment to human rights throughout the world is well-known. We hope you will convey that commitment in China through some of the actions outlined above. We appreciate your attention to the Commission's concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair